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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's plays are the apex of western achievement in the humanities and as such afford a highly fertile mechanism for teaching gifted elementary and secondary students. Studying Shakespeare facilitates the understanding of an earlier form of the English language and illustrates the evolutionary nature of language. Aside from a sense of historical continuity, reading and viewing Shakespeare can help students to develop a love of both the sound and sense of language. Analytical and imaginative thinking can be stimulated by the figurative speech in Shakespeare's plays, which are primarily written in verse, and poetry by virtue of its compression of language is highly challenging. Reading the plays promotes knowledge of and discussion about history, psychology, anthropology, sociology, government, and ethics. In teaching Shakespeare, teachers should familiarize students with the story, or plot, of the play; if they are reading the play, they should also have a scene-by-scene synopsis to make it easier to follow the play. The play can be discussed as both a literary work and a dramatic production. Students should be encouraged to visualize the play's events and the characters' actions and reactions. Students could act out the entire play, or focus on passages (such as soliloquies) which can be analyzed critically. (CB)

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Secondary Students

Talk to the California Association for the Gifted

Feb. 12, 1984

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I'd like to introduce myself by mentioning that I have two sets of credentials, the first as a teacher of Shakespeare at San Diego State University; the second, just as relevant, as the mother of four children between twenty-six and ten, all of whom, in their own ways, find pleasure in Shakespeare. Even my four-year-old grandson knows a few tag lines: he takes literally "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears," and regards it as an amusing but reasonable request from someone who has no ears. He thinks "To be or not to be" has something to do with what you want to be when you grow up, so usually he adds, "a fireman." I've peddled Shakespeare at home for years, not primarily out of altruism but because I wanted my children to share my favorite interest. Now I always have someone glad to accompany me to the San Diego Old Globe; to the Ashland, Oregon Festival; to college Shakespeare productions; or to Shakespeare movies (especially if I pay for the tickets). I tape the BBC television productions of Shakespeare, and we watch them often. Watching Shakespeare is our most festive form of togetherness. I recommend it to other parents, especially those who don't like camping. At any rate, although I've never taught on the elementary or secondary levels, I have had some experience in turning kids on to Shakespeare. On this most personal level, among other

benefits, it's a wonderful way to bridge the generation gap and bring the young from native barbarism to wisdom and culture.

I've organized my talk basically into two parts: first, why we should teach children Shakespeare, then how. The why is because I know there are many competing curricular claims on parents, teachers, and administrators. I appreciate these claims. I am wholly in favor of computer literacy. I'm also convinced that children should learn a foreign language, and the younger the better. But to sacrifice our greatest literature to such skills, however valid, is to sacrifice the broadest and most civilizing of influences one can bring to bear on young minds. Shakespeare's plays are the apex of western achievement in the humanities, the epitome of the liberal arts on which we rely to foster the liberal thinkers whose wisdom can help us control the magnificent and terrifying technology of our time.

But that is perhaps too broad a statement to be convincing. And you might have to convince others about the value of Shakespeare in the school curriculum. Let me be more specific, then, about the benefits to be derived from Shakespeare study, sufficient to compensate for the time and effort that must be expended before children feel comfortable with a version of our language some four-hundred years old and mainly in verse. For poetry is inherently more difficult to understand than prose, if only because of its compression. What do these plays have to offer children? Why should we be selling them?

For starters, there's something to be said for being able to understand an earlier form of one's language. Although Shakespeare's work has been translated into just about all the major European and Asian languages, we Americans have the privilege of reading Shakespeare in the original. Why a privilege? For one thing it gives children a view of

language as a changing, developing system. In sixteenth-century English, to be tall is to be prompt, active, elegant, dexterous, and brave as well as of inordinate height; to be brave denotes not only valor but showy dress; a fat room is malodorous and smokey; a fat man (Hamlet fencing with Laertes) is not overweight but out of training and out of condition. Most words, of course, have not changed beyond recognition: Shakespeare wrote modern English, not middle or old English. There's something very nice about an awareness of sharing a language with people who lived long ago, and about knowing that in all the important affairs of life they perceived, felt, and comprehended things much as we do. This language we share becomes a bond with the past. For the most part what has become unintelligible to us (without footnotes) is Shakespeare's slang, and that can teach young people to use standard diction, for standard words reach the widest audience and last the longest.

Aside from a sense of historical continuity, reading and viewing Shakespeare can help a child to develop a love of language. In fact, that love affair can begin before the child understands very much of what Shakespeare's words mean. Sometimes a blur of images delights, no matter how inaccurately we paint them in our minds. Here is a forest where Titania, the Fairy Queen, and human lovers experience a midsummer night's dream:

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
 Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,
 Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
 With sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine.
 There sleeps Titania sometime of the night,
 Lulled in these flowers with dances and delight;
 And there the snake throws her enamelled skin,
 Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in.

(2.1.249-56)¹

You can show children pictures of oxlips and eglantine, but it's really

just as well if they imagine their own flowers.

Sometimes it's the sound of the words that captivates. Here's a passage from Romeo and Juliet, all flutes and cellos:

How silver-sweet sound lovers' tongues by night
Like softest music to attending ears.
(2.2.165-66)

Sound is an aesthetic or recreational aspect of language. Although almost all of Shakespeare's plays are partially in prose,² most are predominately in verse.³ Shakespeare uses either blank verse (unrhymed iambic five-beat lines) or rhymed verse for different dramatic situations, thus distinguishing characters not only by what they say but by how they say it. In the way of language, Shakespeare had more arrows to his bow than do most modern playwrights who only write prose. And since regular rhythm and rhyme are a treat for the ear, Shakespeare cannot only delineate character precisely but can turn language into a celebration, an approximation of music augmented by ideational content.

Also among the recreational aspects of language--and a sine qua non of Shakespearean poetry--is figurative speech. The ability to understand and originate similes and metaphors (direct and indirect comparisons) shows itself very early in gifted children and is a measure of analytical and imaginative thinking. Here is dawn in Romeo and Juliet:

Look, love, what envious streaks
Do lace the severing clouds in yonder East.
Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountaintops.
(3.5.7-12)

And here are the two heroines of A Midsummer Night's Dream:

So we grew together,
Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,
But yet an union in partition;
Two lovely berries molded on one stem.
(3.2.208-11)

We associate figurative language with verse, yet Shakespeare's prose plays host to some of his most memorable comparisons, witness Hamlet: "this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire--that, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors" (2.2.295-299).

Shakespeare's prose is as carefully designed and crafted as his verse. The plays are a great feast of language that, while delighting, instruct us in the infinite possibilities for expression within this finely tuned instrument, our native tongue. Is Shakespeare's language too difficult? Not for the gifted.

I have been suggesting, implicitly, that reading Shakespeare is an excellent way to teach children to read poetry. Not only are there passages in the plays whose poetic value equals anything ever written, but a special benefit accrues when teaching poetry by way of drama: the plot of the play maintains interest that might flag when reading an isolated lyric. Drama is a form of narrative: because the play tells a story, the playwright must generate suspense. Moreover, because the lines are all spoken by particular characters, they acquire added psychological interest from the character and the context. We ask: why is he saying that? And why now? It's significant that most of Shakespeare's explicitly moralizing speeches are spoken by fools like Polonius or villains like Iago. Shakespeare would no more have risked boring his audience with morality for morality's sake than he would have risked boring them with poetry for poetry's sake. Instead, all the forms and uses of language are geared to serve Shakespeare's primary purpose: to create suspenseful, exciting drama.

While the child becomes a confident reader of poetry, he or she is also developing a standard of greatness in literature from reading what has never been bettered. After knowing Shakespeare, children are far less likely to mistake the trendy for the timeless, far more likely to concern themselves with their own writing styles: to realize the affective potential of words, to use words felicitously marshalled, and to care about the quality of their content. It's important to have high standards in the arts, to be acquainted with what the most brilliant and talented artists from the past ages have produced. For although we are living in a period of great creativity, our children are in danger of being swallowed up whole by commercial pop culture which, while often clever, is nevertheless too accessible, too effortless, too narrow, too sensational, to serve as the exclusive furnishings of young minds.

We do, in effect, furnish our minds just as we furnish our homes. I have been talking so far about historical and aesthetic furnishings, and I'd like to pursue those two avenues of thought somewhat further. I spoke of Shakespeare's vocabulary giving the child a sense of historical continuity. That, of course, is just one form that a sense of history can take. I don't mean a sense of history primarily in terms of dates and events, though it's enlightening to remember that the greatest writer in our language was creating entertainments for an exceptionally sophisticated urban public over thirty years before our pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. What's more important is for the child to realize that civilization didn't begin with the birth of our republic, that wisdom is ageless, that human nature is unchanging, that history repeats itself--with variations--that Shakespeare was Freud and Jung, Tennessee Williams and Neil Simon, an unsurpassed student of human nature who expressed his insights not in the

terminology of social science but in drama so compelling that it still holds the boards after four-hundred years. In other words, the old is also new. A work need not have been written yesterday to be relevant to us. Knowing Shakespeare, who makes not only his own time but pre-Homeric Greece (Troilus and Cressida), pre-imperial Rome (Coriolanus, Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra), legendary Britain (King Lear), and medieval Scotland (Macbeth) seem contemporary, lends itself to an appreciation of history, to a much needed historical perspective, to feeling the past as present.

Benefit can also be derived from history as hobby. The starting place for the hobbyist is likely to be the English Renaissance. Shakespeare was born in 1564, six years after Elizabeth I was crowned; he died in 1616, thirteen years into the reign of James I, son of Mary Queen of Scots, who was condemned to death by her cousin Elizabeth's English court. Tudor and Stuart dynastic history, recently rediscovered by the media, is fascinating. Television shows like The Six Wives of Henry VIII and Elizabeth R, plays and movies like Maxwell Anderson's Anne of the Thousand Days and Robert Bolt's A Man for All Seasons and Vivat! Vivat, Regina!--these testify to the intrinsic interest of the period. The domestic saga of Henry's spouses (divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, died); of Lady Jane Grey, England's nine-day queen, executed before she turned seventeen; of Bloody Mary's frustrating marriage to Phillip II of Spain; of Elizabeth's triumphs as the most fiercely independent women in Europe, one of the first role-models for today's feminists; and of her cousin Mary Stuart, who married the man accused of murdering her first husband--all this is intriguing stuff.

From the Tudors and Stuarts, one can easily dip back into Plantagenet history--from Henry II (Lion in Winter) to Richard III, immortalized and

slandered (I think) as the deformed villain who murders his way to the throne, including among his victims his nephews, the princes in the Tower. Of the thirty-eight plays currently attributed to Shakespeare, one deals with thirteenth-century bad King John, one with sixteenth-century Henry VIII, eight others with fifteenth-century Plantagenet history. These eight tell a consecutive story, constituting a kind of dramatic epic or an English War and Peace. The cast includes Joan of Arc portrayed, from the English perspective, as a witch; Jack Cade, the Che' Guevara of his day; Richard II, the petulant aesthete; Henry IV, his cousin and guilt-ridden murderer; his son Henry V, the great warrior-king who forged an Anglo-French empire that barely outlived him; his son Henry VI, in Shakespeare henpecked and chronically mad, yet today a candidate for canonization; Edward IV, fighter and carouser who died of dissipation; and the last Plantagenet, Richard III, whose defeat at the hands of Henry Tudor ended the War of the Roses and initiated a new dynasty. I can't think of a more sugar-coated way to bring young people to history than through historical fiction. Shakespeare's treatment of history is especially compelling (even if a little inaccurate) because he uses history as an adjunct to drama. Compelling drama requires revelation of character in conflict. And it is here that Shakespeare shines: the ability to reveal subtleties of character and to intrigue us with the nuances of relationships are what most readers and spectators think of as his greatest gift.

Shakespeare brings us to history because he wrote four centuries ago and depicted even earlier periods. He also brings us to psychology, anthropology, sociology, government, and ethics. As Marjorie Garber, director of the Harvard post-doctoral seminar I attended this summer, remarked when we expressed surprise over an overtly Freudian

interpretation, "But didn't you know? Shakespeare was Freud!" What she meant was that the only significant difference between these two giants was that Freud attempted to study human nature systematically, developing terminology and coherent theories, whereas Shakespeare depicted his profound understanding of human nature through drama. For this reason, Freud and scores of other psychoanalysts who followed him have addressed themselves to interpreting Shakespeare.

As for anthropology, Professor Garber's most recent book is entitled Coming of Age in Shakespeare and reflects such concerns as rites of passage and maturation patterns: separation from parents or siblings as a preparation for sexual love and marriage; using names and nicknames as a sign of individual exploits or status; learning a new language or a new way of speaking; sexual initiation, parenthood, and acceptance of death. Shakespeare provides sociological as well as anthropological insights, for each play is a world, or society, in itself; and some plays offer a choice of societies: in The Merchant of Venice, Shylock's commercial Rialto, the Wall Street of Venice, is juxtaposed against the jet set's idyllic Belmont, which Shylock's daughter joins by her marriage to a Christian; in As You Like It, the urban world of the court contrasts with the commune-like forest; in Othello, a prejudiced but law-abiding Venice becomes the measure of a frontier-like Cyprus, where violence is less easily checked. Shakespeare's ten English history plays teach lessons in government or political science, raising such questions as these: what makes a great leader? what personally appealing qualities are irrelevant for leadership? what less appealing qualities are necessary for effective leadership? when should loyalty to country transcend loyalty to the leader? what are the abiding political values? Political questions figure not only in the

history plays but also in many of the tragedies. Hamlet is about Denmark as well as about its prince, Macbeth about Scotland, Lear about England, Julius Caesar about Rome, and Antony and Cleopatra about the then known world. In all these plays we see how political events involving millions are informed and often dictated by the private morality of their leaders.

And in all these plays, however complex the human and political problems, the moral poles are never really in doubt; the audience never loses sight of right and wrong because Shakespeare does not confuse the two. Government or political science is always linked to ethics in Shakespeare. More important than the protagonist is the nation: we are always reminded that the ultimate good is for the nation to be prudently governed by men of just and merciful character. That's why we accept Hamlet's death. Although Hamlet destroys the source of rottenness in the state of Denmark, he has partaken of that rottenness. After hearing his callous comment upon accidentally killing Polonius ("I'll lug the guts into the neighbor room"), after learning how breezily he sends his old school-mates, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to their deaths, we sense that he is no longer a man of sufficient moral sensitivity to lead a nation. The coarsening of Hamlet's character is as tragic as his death.

Sometimes the nation is reduced to a narrow society: such is the Verona of Romeo and Juliet, where two principal families have been allowed the luxury of a feud that would not have been tolerated in lesser forms. Shakespeare found the story of Romeo and Juliet in a long narrative poem by a contemporary Puritan. For the Puritan poet, the sin that is the mainspring of the action lies in the young lovers deceiving their parents by eloping. For Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet are the innocent victims of their parents' hatred. Hatred is the sin. Sin also lies in a society that

permits the wealthy to act outside and without respect for the law--a fatal privilege. The privileges of wealth are what Romeo calls into question as he urges the apothecary to illegally sell him the poison he soon drinks for Juliet's sake:

Rom. Famine is in thy cheeks,
Need and oppression starveth in thy eyes,
Contempt and beggary hangs upon thy back:
The world is not thy friend, nor the world's law;
The world affords no law to make thee rich;
Then be not poor, but break it and take this.

Apo. My poverty but not my will consents.

Rom. I pay thy poverty and not thy will.

(5.1.69-76)

The Shakespearean ethic may also be illustrated within a single individual. Othello, the great black general, is imposed upon by a jealous subordinate and made to think his young white bride is unfaithful. Vulnerable to manipulation because of his lack of acquaintance with courtly manners, because of his greater age and racial difference, perhaps because of fear of women, of inadequacy or rejection, Othello believes Iago and, in a frenzy of anger and self-righteousness, appoints himself plaintiff, judge, and executioner. Pride, lack of self-knowledge, self-deception, impatience--all are unwitting faults but evil nevertheless, for as the play shows us, these unwitting faults lead to the great intentional evil of murder miscalled justice. Shakespeare's triumph as an ethical writer is that although he may plumb the depths of what today we call neurosis, or of the "normal" twists and turnings of the human mind, he is always aware of the moral injunctions that make civilized life possible. Psychology does not defeat morality; and though we may understand the reasons for a wrongful act, we are never asked to condone it.

What this amounts to is that Shakespeare can be used to provide

children with a superb interdisciplinary introduction to the humanities. Which disciplines are emphasized may vary with the age of the children, with the interests of the teacher, or with the particular body of knowledge whose mastery is called for by a curriculum. But the plays themselves are a repository of every field of humane thought that can better fit a child for life. To some extent this holds true for literature in general. To read fiction is to encounter a world of different people in critical situations, thus broadening one's sense of the human condition and of human nature. But some authors write better than others. To read Shakespeare is a special pleasure--and profit--for in his plays characters seem real rather than imagined, and Shakespeare's understanding of and compassion for human frailty are matched only by his ability to confer unequalled luster on the English language, to construct dramas that grip the imagination despite four intervening centuries.

Now I would like to turn to the question of how to teach Shakespeare in elementary and secondary schools, a subject on which there is a redoubtable literature. Rather than provide you with my own makeshift bibliography, I'd like to call your attention to the recent one prepared by Andrew M. McLean, Shakespeare: Annotated Bibliographies and Media Guide for Teachers.⁴ This excellent compilation is divided into three parts, the first containing forty-one pages of mostly annotated citations of articles, chapters of books, and entire books on teaching Shakespeare at pre-college levels. The paragraph-length annotations are quite useful for giving you a genuine sense of the work being described. Some of the works cited feature lesson plans, teaching outlines, and assignments. Some are discursive, blow-by-blow accounts by teachers of what they did and how their pupils responded. Some are discussions by teaching-oriented Shakespeare scholars

on what to look for in the plays. As you would expect, there's no problem finding material on teaching Shakespeare to junior high and high-school students; but I noticed some articles on teaching Shakespeare to superior (gifted) junior-high-school students and quite a few on teaching Shakespeare in the fourth through sixth grades. Part I also contains twenty-seven pages of bibliography on teaching individual plays and about fifteen pages on teaching Shakespeare through performance of the plays. Part II cites reviews and articles on Shakespeare movies and accessible television productions (like the BBC's), including articles on how to teach the production as well as the text. As you probably know, the BBC has almost finished its project of televising the entire Shakespeare canon and, though an uneven series, some of the productions are masterpieces. The reviews listed are especially helpful for deciding which productions might be worth acquiring for your school or district library. Part III of McLean's bibliography is an extensive media guide, listing and describing film strips, slides, records, cassette tape lectures, and movies; prices are quoted and a handy directory of distributor addresses is appended. McLean's bibliography is in paperback, so it's not only useful but affordable. And it's encouraging that the bibliographical spadework has already been accomplished.

Next I'd like to consider some of the methods that have been suggested for teaching Shakespeare, among them some of my own. First I would like to suggest, from my experience, ways to introduce Shakespeare to children no older than six or seven. This was my Suzuki-Shakespeare method. I began by telling my kids the stories of plays I thought they would like. Romeo and Juliet and A Midsummer Night's Dream were my choices. Sometimes I told the stories, sometimes read them. A particularly nice book for this level

is E. Nesbit's The Children's Shakespeare (you may know her as the author of The Railway Children, The Story of the Amulet, or Five Children and It). Incidentally, her retelling of the plays is, I think, very appropriate for story time, even in the earliest grades. Here is how she begins Romeo and Juliet:

Once upon a time there lived in Verona two great families named Montagu and Capulet. They were both rich, and I suppose they were as sensible, in most things, as other rich people. But in one thing they were extremely silly. There was an old, old quarrel between the two families, and instead of making it up like reasonable folks, they made a sort of pet of their quarrel, and would not let it die out. So that a Montagu wouldn't speak to a Capulet if he met one in the street--nor a Capulet to a Montagu--or if they did speak, it was to say rude and unpleasant things, which often ended in a fight. And their relations and servants were just as foolish, so that street fights and duels and uncomfortablenesses of that kind were always growing out of the Montagu-and-Capulet quarrel.

Now Lord Capulet, the head of that family, gave a party--a grand supper and dance--and he was so hospitable that he said anyone might come to it--except (of course) the Montagues. But there was a young Montagu named Romeo, who very much wanted to be there, because Rosaline, the lady he loved, had been asked. This lady had never been at all kind to him, and he had no reason to love her; but the fact was that he wanted to love somebody, and as he hadn't seen the right lady, he was obliged to love the wrong one. So to the Capulets' grand party he came, with his friends Mercutio and Benvolio.⁵

I stayed with the same two plays for a few months, of course interspersing other stories but regularly returning to Shakespeare until my children could fill in the names of the characters and remember events: "And then Romeo killed . . ." and they would shout "Tybalt." "And Juliet killed herself with a . . ." "dagger." They named their goldfish Romeo and Juliet. Naturally the goldfish died. It was fated. (We replaced them with many new Romeos and Juliets.) Then, on their own, my children started acting out the stories. The love scenes and death scenes turned into high comedy. But Romeo's duels with Tybalt and Paris were truly gripping (I gave them rolled-up newspapers to use as swords). I took them to see Franco Zeffirelli's wonderful movie of Romeo and Juliet, and they loved it.

We saw it several times. I'm sure they missed almost all of the dialogue, but they could follow the action. By second grade, they fancied themselves authorities on Shakespeare, and I gradually added more plays to their repertory. They were much too young to read the plays, but they could follow the plots, act them out, and even discuss them. "What went wrong in Romeo and Juliet? Was someone to blame?" I would ask. And they considered all the characters and eventually reached a very adult concept, realizing in their own way that this was a tragedy of good intentions: that everyone had meant well but had somehow done ill, and that the root of the tragedy lay in the feud rather than in any single individual. Without having actually read Shakespeare, they had learned how good people can be trapped in inherited situations; they had learned something about the complexity of life. They looked forward to reading the plays when they were old enough. In effect, they had acquired reading readiness for Shakespeare.

This is the kind of approach I would recommend, either at home or in school, for children from first through fourth grades. Telling and retelling the stories; reading not the plays but the plots of the plays; having children act out scenes; having them see productions like Zeffirelli's designed for a mass audience and consequently cut enough to be intelligible to children; and talking about what happens, why it happens, and whether it had to happen. At this level the focus should be on character, event, and possible meanings, not on language.

And this is as good a place as any to state that I said "possible meanings" deliberately. You should never feel that you can't teach a play because you're not sure you've found "the" meaning. There's no single right meaning in Shakespeare: the plays aren't math problems. They're more like Rorschach tests: in them we see our own humanity. They help us

to develop our own potential for understanding life; we may all agree that feuds are wrong, that children shouldn't be taught to hate, but beyond that lie many questions on which children, like adults, will differ. Was Romeo wrong in proposing to a girl his family couldn't accept? Was the marriage too hasty? Were Romeo and Juliet the only impetuous characters? How much loyalty to their parents' values do children owe? Should the friar have secretly married Romeo and Juliet? Should the nurse have abetted the marriage? Is there anything to admire in Romeo's killing Tybalt? Was it just for the prince to have commuted the death penalty for Romeo? Should the lovers have told their parents of their marriage after Romeo was banished? Did the friar go too far by giving Juliet a sleeping potion? Was he a coward for deserting Juliet in the tomb? Who was more mature, Romeo or Juliet? Were their deaths inevitable? Could the deaths of the other characters have been avoided? Why do the innocent suffer? Will they always suffer? What is love? Does fate play a part in human events, or are we masters of our fates? Even young children can grapple with some of these questions. Attempting to answer them is a wonderful way of learning to think about existence. And more people have thought in print about Shakespeare than about any other author. So don't worry about the right answer or "the" meaning. In literature as in life, there are many possible meanings and ways of seeing. If we have helped children to see how many ways there are to interpret experience, we have enriched them as human beings.

And while I'm talking about meaning, let me remind you that we can never know for certain what Shakespeare meant. Indeed, he may not have known exactly what he meant. A great artist has greater access to his subconscious than do most of us. He presents us with words, images,

actions. It is up to us to translate them. As we grow older and acquire more experience, we see more in the plays: sometimes our earlier impressions are displaced by our later ones. But as for Shakespeare's intention, we don't know it and we can't ask him. To ascribe a particular intention to a writer is what modern critics calls the intentional fallacy. And therefore we must realize that we can only give the next generation Shakespeare and not the truth about Shakespeare.

For older grade-school children--fifth and sixth graders--Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare is a good starting place. Again, I would read children the story of the play, but this time from a more sophisticated source like Lamb. Because Charles and Mary Lamb wrote in the nineteenth century, their vocabulary and syntax are more adult, even though they were writing for juveniles, and they occasionally use paraphrased but recognizable quotations from the plays in the process of retelling them. I'll read you their version of the beginning of A Midsummer Night's Dream:

There was a law in the city of Athens which gave to its citizens the power of compelling their daughters to marry whomsoever they please; for upon a daughter's refusing to marry the man her father had chosen to be her husband, the father was empowered by this law to cause her to be put to death; but as fathers do not often desire the death of their own daughters, even though they do happen to prove a little refractory, this law was seldom or never put in execution, though perhaps the young ladies of that city were not unfrequently threatened by their parents with the terrors of it.

There was one instance, however, of an old man, whose name was Egeus, who actually did come before Theseus (at the time the reigning duke of Athens) to complain that his daughter Hermia, whom he had commanded to marry Demetrius, a young man of a noble Athenian family, refused to obey him, because she loved another young Athenian, named Lysander. Egeus demanded justice of Theseus, and desired that this cruel law might be put in force against his daughter.

Hermia pleaded in excuse for her disobedience that Demetrius had formerly professed love for her dear friend Helena, and that Helena loved Demetrius to distraction; but this honorable reason, which Hermia gave for not obeying her father's command, moved not the stern Egeus.⁶

One reason I like A Midsummer Night's Dream for children between ten

and twelve is because it treats love as comedy; and although I think they would be moved by the story of Romeo and Juliet and by the film version, they would probably be too embarrassed to act it out. Also, in the fifth and sixth grade gifted children can begin to read and perform scenes from Shakespeare. A Midsummer Night's Dream has a large cast of characters, more female roles than most of the plays, no serious love scenes, a fairyland forest setting, and a hilarious play-within-a-play--the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, a classical Romeo and Juliet, rendered by "hard-handed men that work in Athens here, "Which never labored in their minds till now" (5.1.72-73)--a scene made to order for children to act out. Aside from the Pyramus and Thisbe skit, children are sure to enjoy Act I, scene ii, in which Peter Quince the carpenter casts the skit, and ACT III, scene i, in which Titania, Queen of the Fairies, falls in love with Bottom the weaver, who has been transformed into an ass.

If you can choose your texts, I recommend the Folger Library paperback editions. The Folger is a major library in Washington, D.C., devoted to Renaissance drama, especially Shakespeare's. One of its most useful services for the general public is to prepare editions of the plays that are not only accurate but easily readable. Each scene is preceded by a short synopsis. The print is large, and, best of all, each page of text has a facing page of notes explaining not only archaic words but most passages that are difficult because of figurative language, poetic compression, or inversion. Since these notes are in large print, they are actually inviting--not usually the case with footnotes. I don't mean to suggest that children should be expected to consult the notes but rather that it's good to have them should a child wish to clarify a line. Certainly the first, and probably the first few readings, should be

straight read-throughs, as if the child were reading a modern play. In fact, moving through several plays quickly rather than concentrating on just one has also worked well in the classroom. You don't want the child to get bogged down in looking up everything; that would turn pleasure into pain. There's plenty of time--a lifetime--to gain a detailed knowledge of the plays. It's enough that the pre-college student be turned on. Ideally, scholarly apparatus should be available, but its use should be completely voluntary.

Children can act out scenes, utilizing either a readers' theater approach or actual dramatization, depending on how much time you have and the nature of the group. Just sitting in a circle and reading their parts from their seats can be fun. But an attempt at staging is most enjoyable. And attempts at costuming, making props and sets, however amateurish, can involve an entire class. I believe in memorization--what lovelier way is there of furnishing the mind than by filling it with great literature?--but it's risky to ask children to memorize unless they have some further purpose. Memorizing speeches because they constitute one's role in a production is such a further purpose, a rationale the child can accept as valid. If a role is too long for one child, it can always be shared by two. In comedy, anything goes. Moreover, if these scenes, perhaps connected by narrative links, can be performed for other classes, I think you will have licked the problem of motivation. Don't be afraid to cut passages, even within the scene. For this age group, anything that is no longer funny because it no longer makes sense is better excised.

Of the available professional productions of A Midsummer Night's Dream, the most outstanding is The Royal Shakespeare Company's film version, directed by Peter Hall and starring Diana Rigg and David Warner.

There's also the old Max Reinhardt movie, unfortunately in black and white though with delightfully lavish sets. This one, surprisingly, stars Mickey Rooney, James Cagney, Dick Powell, and Olivia de Havilland. It's lots of fun. The BBC television production is so-so: the fairy scenes are wonderful and the lovers are cute, but Bottom isn't very funny at all. In lieu of a production, you might consider playing the famous Mendelssohn incidental music to A Midsummer Night's Dream (I'm sure you know the wedding march), available as an inexpensive cassette from any discount record store.

A Midsummer Night's Dream opens up many fascinating questions about the dream, imagination, art, and love. Even grade-school students can appreciate the complexity of the dramatic situation here. The audience watches a play--an imaginative construct--in which fairies--another imaginative construct--become an audience for the love affairs of mortal lovers who think of their "real" misadventures as a dream, and who at last watch a play about the legendary Pyramus and Thisbe (another imaginative construct) performed to celebrate the wedding of the legendary Theseus to the legendary Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. While we watch A Midsummer Night's Dream, we become absorbed: this palpable fiction becomes our reality. Thus children can begin to see the basis of art in acts of imagination.

Children of junior-high and high-school age can profitably consider Romeo and Juliet and A Midsummer Night's Dream together, for the basic plot situation--a stolen marriage--is the same in both plays, but in the former the result is tragic, in the latter comic. Thus children learn that situation alone does not determine tragedy or comedy. The study of genre or literary type is apt here. What do we mean by comedy and tragedy, and

what dictates whether a play is one or the other, or some combination or approximation? You could ask students at what point in Romeo and Juliet did they know they were in a tragedy? At what point in A Midsummer Night's Dream did they know that things would turn out well? Analyzing their reactions can help them to better understand how a playwright manipulates the feelings of the audience in order to create the suspension of our disbelief, dramatic suspense, and sympathy.

Older children are likely to be interested in learning something about Shakespeare's life and about the Elizabethan theater. An unusually readable biographical and historical treatment is Marchette Chute's Shakespeare of London, a Dutton paperback. If you want something brief, the Folger Library texts of the plays include prefatory material, about half a dozen pages, on Shakespeare's life and times, enough to at least make it clear that no one else wrote these plays and that Shakespeare was able to transcend the limitations of the primitive theatrical conditions of Elizabethan London--an outdoor playhouse, matinee performances only, the scantiest scenery and props, and no actresses at all. One reason why Romeo and Juliet speak such magnificent love poetry is because Juliet was played by a boy; physical passion could not be shown, only told. And since the plays were performed for Londoners at 2:00 on clear afternoons, all other times and weathers had to be depicted by Shakespeare's poetry. Here is dawn from Hamlet:

But look, the morn in russet mantle clad
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill.
(1.1.166-67)

And here is the storm from King Lear:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks. Rage, blow.
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks.
You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,

Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
 Singe my white head. And thou, all-shaking thunder,
 Strike flat the thick rotundity o'th'world,
 Crack Nature's moulds, all germains spill at once,
 That makes ingrateful man.

(3.2.1-9)

Had Shakespeare's theater possessed the benefits of modern technology, we might not have had such powerful verse. There's an obvious moral lesson in turning physical limitations into spiritual assets.

Biography and theater history are only two areas that supplement reading the plays. Designing sets and sketching costumes for a modern production are engaging projects for children gifted in the visual arts. For the musically inclined, there are extant melodies for some, though not all, of the songs in the plays; they are lovely--well worth learning. Or children could try setting the songs to original music as is the case in most productions. All the plays except for The Comedy of Errors contain music. Everyone should make an attempt at composing a dozen or so lines of blank verse, just to get the feel of Shakespeare's chief linguistic medium. Blank verse consists of five iambs (∨/) per line with an occasional substitution of a trochee (∧), anapest (∩/), dactyl (∩∩), or spondee (//), and no rhymes. The more monosyllabic words you use, the easier it is.

But for older students, reading the play's, above all, the thing. Again, it's wise to start with the story of the play. For gifted seventh through twelfth graders I suggest Marchette Chute's Stories from Shakespeare. Here is how Chute begins Macbeth:

Macbeth is one of the greatest of the tragedies, swift as night and dark as spilt blood, with death and battle and witchcraft bound together in wonderful poetry to tell the story of a man and woman who destroyed themselves. Macbeth and his wife wanted the throne of Scotland, and they took it. But the act forced them into a murderer's world of sleepless torment, always struggling to find safety and always sinking deeper in their own terror.

The story opens in ancient Scotland during a time of war. The

king has been defied by a band of rebels and he has sent his trusted captains, Macbeth and Banquo, to defeat them. In thunder and lightning, not far from the place of battle, three witches meet on a lonely heath. They plan to meet again at twilight, to speak to Macbeth as he returns from the fighting, and then they vanish into the storm.

Fair is foul, and foul is fair,
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

The king of Scotland waits for news of the battle, and a sergeant arrives to tell him of Macbeth's valor. The victorious king also hears of the traitorous behavior of one of his noblemen, the thane of Cawdor, and decides to give the title to Macbeth instead. Macbeth is already the thane of Glamis, but this is a higher honor.

The witches gather again to wait for their victim, chattering to each other in quick, slippery rhyme like evil children. They sing an incantation to wind up the charm, and when Macbeth enters his first remark is an echo of one of theirs. "So foul and fair a day I have not seen."

Discussion of Macbeth is likely to focus on whether Macbeth who, like Richard III, kills his way to the throne and then continues to kill in order to keep power (something like the two parts of The Godfather, but with a villain-protagonist who dies physically as well as spiritually), is a free agent or just a puppet pushed around by his wife and/or the witches. But discussion is equally likely to focus on the language of the play, in particular, on how often we hear about what is foul and fair. This reflects a favorite Elizabethan philosophical concern: the difficulty of distinguishing reality from appearance.

Macbeth is the shortest and simplest of the great tragedies--the others being Hamlet, Othello, and Lear. Hamlet is the longest. It and King Lear are usually considered the greatest; they are among the most difficult because they were written during Shakespeare's mature period and because of the speeches of characters who are, or are pretending to be, insane. Othello and The Merchant of Venice, a comedy whose comic villain is Shylock the Jew (often portrayed in our time as a tragic victim) are challenging plays, especially appealing to young people aware of and concerned about racial and religious problems, both modern and historical.

The Taming of the Shrew is a challenging comedy that makes the reader come to terms with what today is often considered sexism as Kate, headstrong and violent, is converted to proper wifely submissiveness. (I like to think of this play as a male wish-fulfillment fantasy.) Young people should have the opportunity to work through the problem of how to deal with a masterpiece that seems to imply a message we moderns find unacceptable. Should we try to read with sixteenth-century eyes? Or should we insist on relevance for today. And if the latter, are there ways to rescue a "prejudiced" play? In this connection, I quote Theodore Weiss, American poet and critic: "we are the play's latest experience, the changed circumstances in which they must live."⁸ Finding meanings that are acceptable for us in the plays is an exercise that reaches to the very heart of the humanities, a fitting exercise for the gifted. That is not to say that we should warp the plays in order to align them with our present values but rather that we should seek their timeless qualities. For as Shakespeare's best friend, the poet-playwright Ben Jonson, wrote, "He was not of an age, but for all time!"

In seeking the timeless, you can compare modern adaptations of the plays with their originals. Leonard Bernstein's West Side Story, a fine movie, is based on Romeo and Juliet. The Comedy of Errors is the source of Rogers and Hart's The Boys from Syracuse, Taming of the Shrew of Cole Porter's Kiss Me Kate. Both of these musical comedies are available on record from Dramabook Publishers. Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is a witty existentialist version of Hamlet, in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, benighted nobodies symbolic of modern man, displace Denmark's prince to become the play's anti-heroic protagonists. To read Shakespeare and Stoppard together would be a most challenging

assignment for gifted eleventh and twelfth graders. Comparing Paul Mazursky's movie Tempest with Shakespeare's The Tempest would be another interesting assignment for this age group. So too are comparisons of foreign-language treatments of Shakespeare, e.g., the Japanese Macbeth, Throne of Blood; or the Russian King Lear. Different cultures, like different people, find reflections of themselves in Shakespeare. When they adapt his works, they tell us as much about themselves and their values as they do about Shakespeare.

One final caveat: I've given you a chronological list of the plays (the chronology actually consists of scholars' educated guesses) because the language, by and large, becomes more difficult as we move through Shakespeare's career. Over a period of twenty years, Shakespeare educated his public to understand his style. Thus, in his later plays he could make challenging demands on their comprehension because they had been seeing, or rather hearing (Elizabethans went to "hear" a play rather than to see it) his plays in repertory for over a decade. I suggest, therefore, that you imitate the master: begin with the early plays and work up to the later ones.

I would like very briefly now to review and add some "do's" and a couple of "don't's." It's always a good idea to begin by familiarizing children with the story (plot) of the play; that way they'll find it much easier to follow what's going on. Ideally, if they're reading the play, they should have a scene-by-scene synopsis, such as that provided by the Folger editions. Show a production of the play if you can,⁹ after the students have some familiarity with the story. Discuss not only the play as a literary work but also the production. Has the director dealt fairly with Shakespeare? Does he insinuate a particular interpretation, e.g.,

Olivier's Freudian interpretation of Hamlet? Consider the casting and the visual effects. McLean lists a number of study-guide articles in the film and television section of his bibliography, if you are looking for ideas to consider in regard to a particular production. And don't forget about the usefulness of modern or foreign adaptations of Shakespeare. Have young children act out their adaptation of the play. Have older children act out Shakespeare's text, a scene, several scenes, or the entire play. Or have them read the play aloud, taking parts. If they're performing, let them make sets, props, and costumes; if they're just reading, let them sketch these accessories.

When you discuss the plays as literature, focus on soliloquies or on dialogue revealing inner conflict; or look for critical scenes on which the plot turns. Ask students to visualize what's happening on stage. When we read plays, we tend to be aware only of the character who is speaking and to forget about the other characters on stage and how they are reacting. We read the words of a song but don't imagine the song as music. In performance, comedies like As You Like It and Twelfth Night seem like Broadway musicals.

Now for some "don't's." Try to refrain from lecturing; young people need to experience the liveliness of Shakespeare. Don't focus on lyrical passages for their own sake. Shakespeare knows better. No matter how lovely the verse, its purpose is always to advance the plot. Poetry serves drama in Shakespeare, not the other way around. Nor should you focus on moral speeches, sententia, or archaic words. It's enough if you keep such matters for a question period. Let the children be the ones to bring them up. All these good things will come in time. As Hamlet says, "if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all" (5.2.210-11). For

beginners, it's too easy to kill the spirit by dwelling too long on the part instead of the whole. As teachers we are introducers. Our students have a lifetime to plumb the fathomless depths of these plays. Not all will reach the same place. Some may become lifetime readers of Shakespeare. Others may enjoy performances but shy away from the text. That's all right, too. The most poetically sensitive, like Theodore Weiss, are aware of "the almost god-given character of the works";¹⁰ others may have a lesser experience. We must accept that: there is only so much that we can do. But if we bring our own pleasure, enthusiasm, and sensitivity to bear, and are attuned to the responses of the young, we will do much. A totally heterogeneous public of educated and uneducated, young and old, privileged and underprivileged, made Shakespeare the most successful playwright of the London of his day. I don't see how he can miss with our gifted.

Appendix: THE SHAKESPEARE CANON CHRONOLOGICALLY

The Comedy of Errors
2 Henry VI
3 Henry VI
1 Henry VI
Richard III
Titus Andronicus
The Taming of the Shrew
The Two Gentlemen of Verona
Love's Labor's Lost
Romeo and Juliet
Richard II
A Midsummer Night's Dream
King John
The Merchant of Venice
1 Henry IV
2 Henry IV
Much Ado About Nothing
Henry V
Julius Caesar
As You Like It
Twelfth Night
Hamlet
The Merry Wives of Windsor
Troilus and Cressida
All's Well That Ends Well
Othello
Measure for Measure
Timon of Athens
King Lear
Macbeth
Antony and Cleopatra
Coriolanus
Pericles
Cymbeline
The Winter's Tale
The Tempest
Henry VIII
The Two Noble Kinsmen

Notes

¹All citations are from The Pelican Shakespeare, ed. Alfred Harbage (New York: Viking Press, 1977).

²Except for King John and Richard II.

³Except for As You Like It, Much Ado, Twelfth Night, and Merry Wives of Windsor.

⁴(Urbana, IL.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1980).

⁵(New York: Random House, 1938), pp. 23-24.

⁶(New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1942), pp. 16-17.

⁷(New York: New American Library, 1956), p. 168.

⁸The Breath of Clowns and Kings: Shakespeare's Early Comedies and Histories (New York: Atheneum, 1971), p. 2.

⁹Listening to recordings, either as a substitute for or adjunct to seeing productions, allows children to follow the speeches in their books, often an excellent way of clarifying meaning. Cadmon and the Marlowe Society are known for their fine recorded performances.

¹⁰Weiss, p.3.

SOME USEFUL BOOKS

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